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# Linda Hudson, First Female CEO In Defense, Reflects On What It Takes

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Linda Parker Hudson is a pioneer. As President and



Chief Executive Officer of [BAE Systems](#), Inc. she is the first woman to ever head a major Pentagon contractor. Before coming to BAE, she was the first female corporate officer and company president in the history of [General Dynamics](#); the first female vice president of an operating company at Martin Marietta; and the first female manager at Ford Aerospace.



Being the first is not easy. As Hudson puts it today, “there’s a burden with going first and feeling as though if you fail you might close the doors for others.” But that hasn’t stopped Linda Hudson from being the only woman in the room for most of her 40-year career in the defense industry. She battled hard to overcome bias and move up, accepting every promotion she was offered. In doing so, her career became emblematic of the unprecedented opportunities that women were winning across American society.

Hudson sat down with me on Inauguration Day to reflect on her rise to the top. She didn’t use to talk so freely about her experiences or feelings, fearing that might be interpreted as a sign of weakness. But as she now contemplates retirement from the helm of one of the biggest defense operations in the world — \$14 billion in sales last year, and 43,000 employees — she is more relaxed in discussing her triumphs and frustrations. What emerges from her chronicle is the story of a person who never let setbacks shake her self confidence, a Southern girl who learned to be a street fighter without losing her humanity.

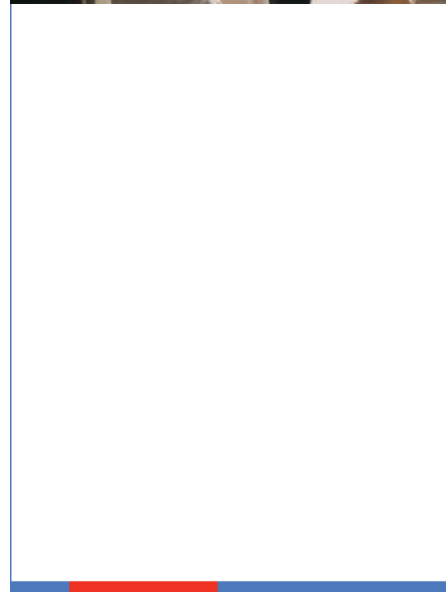
That story began in rural Sandersville, [Georgia](#), where Hudson spent the first seven years of her life. Her parents were public school teachers — her mother taught math and English, her father taught history and geography. They didn’t have much money, but she says they taught her to value learning and pursue her dreams.

The family moved to Leesburg, [Florida](#) near [Orlando](#) when she was in second grade. Orlando was a different place in pre-Disney days, as much a part of the Old South as Sandersville had been (the local high school wasn’t desegregated until her senior year). But once the space program commenced at nearby Cape Canaveral, Hudson could catch a glimpse of another world from her front yard as Mercury, Gemini and Apollo spacecraft lofted into orbit.

That was the dream she fastened onto, desperately wanting to be a pilot or astronaut at a time when few women could aspire to such roles. It didn’t work out even though she later took flying lessons, but in seventh grade a math teacher named Lucille Haynes talked to her about becoming an engineer while working on a project for a science fair. It was the first time Hudson can ever recall talking about engineering, and she was inspired.

Hudson says she encountered few obstacles in life until she went off to college. Her parents and teachers were supportive, and the family’s modest circumstances in some ways actually helped her to develop skills that would serve her well in later life. For instance, because she couldn’t afford the kind of clothes that some other girls bought, she learned to sew and made her own. She says that picking patterns and materials, customizing them to her own needs, and then producing a finished product was an excellent introduction to problem solving.

Hudson observes that millions of other girls learned the same skills from sewing back then, but they



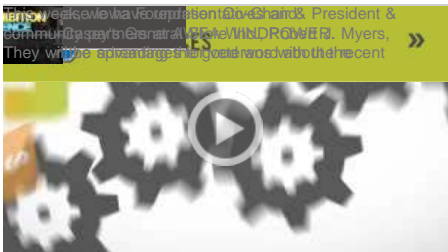
An advertisement for the Yale School of Management MBA for Executives program. The text reads: "Develop the skills and vision to excel." Below this is a box containing "THE YALE MBA WITH A FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY" and a "Take the Next Step" button with a right arrow. The Yale School of Management logo is also present, along with the text "Yale SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT" and "MBA FOR EXECUTIVES" at the bottom.

didn't have the opportunities she did. Perhaps a more precise way of putting it is that they didn't have her personality, which drove her to enter the University of Florida School of Engineering at a time when there was only one other female in her class. The dean of the school today is a woman and Hudson has become a major contributor to its programs, but when she entered in 1968 it was nobody's idea of a progressive learning environment. Some of the professors were skeptical a woman could succeed in engineering, and the prejudice persisted long after her grades proved real aptitude for the profession. She graduated near the top of her class, with a degree in systems engineering.

It was at this point that the first in a series of ironic twists occurred that helped her make it to the top of the defense sector 40 years later. Her job search after graduation narrowed down to two options: General Electric in Louisville, Kentucky and Harris Corporation in nearby Melbourne, Florida. GE might have opened up a broader range of opportunities, but her fiancé didn't want to move to Kentucky. So she took the job at Harris, which became her introduction to the defense industry.

To say that American society wasn't especially welcoming to professional women in the early 1970s is an understatement by today's standards. The local bank refused to count Hudson's income at Harris in determining eligibility for a mortgage because it figured she would get pregnant and leave her job. She describes job conditions for women in the defense industry back then as "ugly," noting that there were no laws against harassment. But Hudson correctly guessed that if she out-performed male co-workers her bosses would move her up, and after some initial hesitance that's what happened.

In 1976 a second twist occurred in her career. Her husband, who had spent much of his life in California, wanted to move back to the Golden State. So Hudson left Harris Corporation and found a new job at Ford Aerospace and Communications Corporation in Newport Beach. California was a revelation for her — a place far more open than her native South to diversity and new ideas. She says that for the first time since she entered engineering, she no longer felt "odd." It was a happy time both personally and professionally. She gave birth to her daughter and was promoted into her first real management job.



But being a woman in a man's profession still had drawbacks, even in the land of opportunity. When she was promoted to production manager at Ford, she discovered there was no restroom for women near the management dining room. When she gave birth, she found that Ford had no policy concerning maternity leave. Nonetheless, she stayed at Ford Aerospace for nearly ten years. She might have stayed there longer, but in a third career twist, defense secretary Casper Weinberger — a fellow not noted for canceling weapons programs — killed the Sergeant York air-defense system on which she was working.

It was that development that sent her back to Florida, to become director of air-defense production operations at Martin Marietta in Orlando. That was in 1985, by which time laws were in place to protect women against harassment. Martin and other big defense companies had more business than they knew what to do with, thanks to the Reagan defense buildup. But it was still a cut-throat business culture in which Hudson says she had to operate like a "street fighter" to survive.

And she did. In that sort of environment, self confidence was indispensable. When the executive who interviewed her for the position at Martin Marietta expressed doubt a woman could do the job, she pushed back — hard — and he was so impressed by her toughness that he gave her the job. Initially she worked on an alternative the company was developing to the canceled Sergeant York system, and then became program director for electro-optical systems. Her performance so impressed superiors that when Martin bought GE Aerospace in 1992, she was offered the job of heading the newly consolidated ordnance unit in Burlington, Vermont.

That was her first job in senior management, but it came at a price. Her husband and daughter did not



want to move to Vermont, so she spent the next four years flying between Burlington and Orlando. That arrangement put stresses on her marriage that eventually led to its breakup — an outcome that troubles Hudson to this day — but it was her willingness to move once again that set her on the fast track to defense-sector stardom.

At the time, the defense industry was in the midst of a wrenching consolidation as companies responded to the end of the Cold War. GE's 1992 divestiture of its aerospace unit was followed two years later by a \$10 billion merger of Martin Marietta with the Lockheed Corporation. Once the two companies were combined, management decided to streamline the operation by selling off pieces not deemed essential to the future enterprise, including Hudson's unit in Burlington. At the time, defense contractor General Dynamics was rebuilding its portfolio by purchasing low-priced businesses that competitors did not want, and Burlington was one of the properties it acquired. So Linda Hudson ended up working for GD.

Her decision to accept CEO Nick Chabreja's offer to become the first female corporate officer at GD headquarters led to the final demise of Hudson's marriage, but it also opened up a whole new realm of corporate experience. Up to that point, she had mainly run operations. As a staff person on the corporate management team, though, she participated in discussions of strategy and acquisitions that revealed how the executives heading publicly-traded companies made decisions. CEO Chabreja was greatly surpassing the financial performance of his defense-sector peers at the time by following a contrarian, numbers-driven strategy, so Hudson gleaned insights she probably could not have obtained elsewhere.

However, the Burlington operation — now called General Dynamics Armaments — was losing money due to plummeting demand, so Chabreja then selected her over two other candidates to return to Vermont and fix the operation. She was the logical candidate since she already knew the business well. But the return to Burlington wasn't like her first run, because she had just agreed to an onerous divorce settlement that left her with little money in the bank, and she now had to fire hundreds of workers to restore the unit's profitability. She achieved the latter goal within a year, but only by furloughing a third of the workforce and becoming the target of death threats. It must have been a lonely time.

Nonetheless, once Burlington was restored to profitability she set about expanding the business through organic growth and acquisitions. During the balance of her tenure there as the first female president of a major operating unit in General Dynamics history, she quadrupled the size of GD Armaments while sustaining steady profitability. She also moved the operation's headquarters to Charlotte, North Carolina. When the time came to pick a new Executive Vice President to head the Combat Systems business within which armaments was ensconced, she was one of the two candidates who got serious consideration. But the business was dominated by the armored-vehicles side of the house, and she lost out to a candidate who had made his name there.

At that point, Hudson considered retiring. She had been treated well during her seven years at General Dynamics, but seemed to have exhausted opportunities for further advancement. And then, one day, her secretary convinced her to take the kind of call from a corporate headhunter that she had always declined to take in the past. BAE Systems, Inc. — the U.S. subsidiary of Europe's biggest arms maker — was seeking a new person to lead its Land & Armaments business. She decided to apply for the job, and got it. Only eight months after taking the helm in 2007, Hudson presided over a \$4.5 billion acquisition that made it the dominant global player in combat vehicles.

Hudson's tenure at Land & Armaments coincided with a huge surge in demand for ground combat systems from U.S. troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, so her unit became a disproportionate contributor to the parent company's results. Land & Armaments enabled BAE to become one of the Pentagon's top five suppliers, and as a result Hudson unexpectedly found herself positioned as a credible candidate to lead the entire U.S. operation when the job came open in 2009. Inc., as insiders call it, is run separately from the British parent under a special security arrangement

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designed to protect sensitive information. So when Hudson won the competition to lead the U.S. business in 2009, she became the most powerful woman in the history of the U.S. defense sector.

And she wasn't bashful about exercising that power, quickly reorganizing the business to eliminate unnecessary layers of management and refocusing operations in preparation for an expected softening in Pentagon demand. There were plenty of opportunities for generating efficiencies, because the operation had coalesced as a result of mergers and acquisitions from numerous legacy cultures that had only partially integrated practices. But even with streamlining, it is an extraordinarily complex enterprise: a global leader in military sensors, jammers and tactical communications gear; the dominant producer of tracked combat vehicles; the biggest supplier of naval ship repair and upgrade services; and a high-end player in cybersecurity.

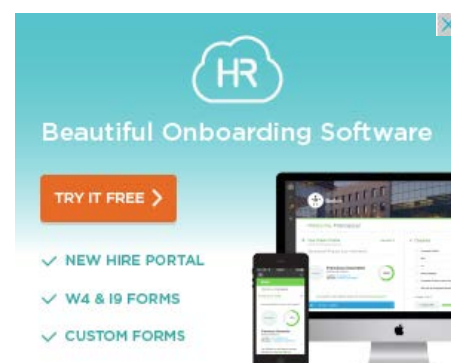
BAE Systems products and services are ubiquitous in the military marketplace on combat systems ranging from the F-35 fighter to the Bradley fighting vehicle to the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer. Some of the programs in which BAE Systems participates are so sensitive that the government doesn't even acknowledge their existence. And it has a growing role in commercial markets such as transportation leveraging its technical competencies. Sitting atop of this technological colossus is a hard-charging Southern girl who frankly admits that she never imagined anyone like her could rise so high when she was growing up. After all, there were no female role models on which to base such aspirations. Which means that she now *is* a role model for the rising generation of women.

Hudson has worked hard to make BAE Systems, Inc. a place that welcomes diversity, which she views as vital to the company's competitiveness. It's hard to argue with that view when she is contributing about half the revenues and returns to a parent company that is paying the highest dividend in the sector. Hudson knows the years ahead are likely to be harder than those in which she rose to the top of the industry, but she believes that neglecting people is no way to weather them. This attitude is reflected in her personal philanthropy, which focuses heavily on nurturing scientific and engineering talent at her alma mater and helping military families (her son-in-law is a Marine who has deployed three times in recent years).

Obviously, Linda Hudson's remarkable success in the defense sector has not been due to luck. The deck was stacked against her in the early years, and she fashioned opportunities where few other women had found them. Perhaps she was fortunate to live during one of those rare moments in human history when people, at least some people, were willing to contemplate a break with tradition. But that doesn't explain why she triumphed while thousands of other men and women never rose so high despite aspiring to similar success.

Maybe it was genes, or maybe it was the support of parents and teachers who encouraged her to think expansively about her potential. But in the early days, she only wanted to be a pilot, and then a good engineer. Running a big defense company never crossed her mind. So how did she end up doing it anyway? The closest thing to an answer I heard in our interview was this: "I've had my share of disappointments... but I honestly can't think of a time when I didn't feel like I should be there." In other words, she moved up because she believed in herself from the beginning, and that provided armor against the stereotypes of an indifferent world.

She continues to exhibit calm self confidence to this day. For instance, she recently accepted an invitation to sit on the Bank of America board of directors, which is not the obvious perch for a systems engineer. It turned out her technology background was just what the board needed. What makes Linda Parker Hudson different from the rest of us is that she sees every challenge as a problem to be solved, and is confident she can solve it. Of course, it helps that she is almost always right about that. But her career, and her life, prove that hard work and faith in oneself are the keys to success in America – perhaps even more today than they were in the past.





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